

RURAL EDUCATION PRACTICE AND POLICY IN MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES: TEACHING AND LEARNING ON THE EDGE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I focus on the problems that face (teacher) education policy and practice in meeting the challenge of ‘persistent and entrenched locational disadvantage’ in marginal communities. In *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, Tony Vinson and colleagues (2015) clearly demonstrate that complex and entrenched disadvantage has continued to characterise a number of Australian communities, with few signs of improvement in the past 15 years. A very high proportion of these disadvantaged localities are in rural areas, and they pose an enormous challenge to policy makers and service providers, as well as to the people who live in the communities themselves. In such contexts, education is both crucially important and inexorably difficult. Agreeing with Vinson, Rawshtorne, Beavis and Ericson, that we need to understand locational disadvantage as a *wicked problem* for a social equity agenda (2015), I argue that the concept of Rural Social Space (Reid et al., 2010) provides a useful and coherent theoretical resource for understanding and addressing this problem, and rethinking the idea of community in ways that are necessary for change to occur. Using an exemplary case of one locality identified by Vinson as threatened with ‘dropping off the edge’, I examine what a wicked problem looks like for social equity in this particular rural social space, and how it calls into question some of our most cherished assumptions about rural communities and rural schooling. The example allows consideration of the kind of policy and practice responses that may be necessary if the problem of educational disadvantage in rural locations is to be adequately addressed¹.

Keywords: rural education, marginality, locational disadvantage, wicked problems, rural social space

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I suggest that teacher educators faced with evidence of the inadequacy of social justice efforts in marginal locations to date can no longer confine ‘educational research’ and teacher education practice to educational matters alone. Drawing on the analysis that the problem of educational disadvantage is often just a facet of a more complex ‘wicked problem’ in marginal rural contexts; I argue that education policy and practice must understand its place in a much larger – and interconnected – social, economic and environmental project. This is what is needed to address the conclusion of Vinson et al., that:

¹ I thank the reviewers of the first draft of this paper for the insightful and helpful comments that have enabled me to develop what I hope is now a stronger and clearer line of argument.

As a society we cannot, and should not, turn away from the challenge of persistent and entrenched locational disadvantage, no matter how difficult it may be to solve the problem (Vinson et al., 2015, p. 5).

The *Dropping off the Edge 2015 Report* (Vinson et al., 2015) has as its subtitle ‘Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia’. The Report confirms the existence of long-standing, entrenched disadvantage in a number of marginalised rural communities, and stresses the fact that this situation has not improved over time. Many of the communities that had been identified as disadvantaged almost a decade previously, in Vinson’s earlier (2007) study, remain difficult and challenging social places today. The importance of strong educational provision in such locations is clear. But, as our national history and sustained research inquiry have shown, it remains inexorably difficult: the ‘rural problem’ of schooling bush children in Australia has proved intractable for well over a century (NSW Parliament, 1904; Hyams, 1979; Boylan & Bandy, 1994; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004; Green & Reid, 2004, 2012; Roberts, 2005; White & Reid, 2008; Reid et al., 2010).

In spite of concerted efforts from national, state and territory governments, the provision of high-quality schooling for children in many rural communities remains inconsistent and unreliable (Mills & Gale, 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013; Vinson et al., 2015; Roberts, 2016). The most marginalised rural communities identified by Vinson et al. (2015) all have significant Indigenous populations, and the national emphasis since 2007 on ‘closing the gap’ in education, health and economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians, shows that policy directions have attempted to respond simultaneously to this range of issues commonly associated with social disadvantage. Governments have introduced education policy aimed at raising educational attainment by improving early education programs, pre-school attendance, improving primary schooling, and providing financial incentives to attract experienced and successful teachers to the most disadvantaged schools, for instance. Health and welfare policies have also been introduced to help solve the range of problems characterising social disadvantage. Yet as Vinson et al. (2015) show, these have failed to change the situation in any demonstrable way.

For schools, teachers and students located out ‘on the edge’, the situation that arises when the full and intersecting effects of marginality remain unaddressed is precarious. Educational researchers are rarely able to claim the public and media attention given to national sociological studies such as the 2007 and 2015 *Dropping off the Edge* research. It is therefore important to use such work to rehearse, highlight and underline the effects and injustices of *locational* disadvantage as they play out in relation to both school and teacher education. It is important to keep attention focussed on educational and systems issues of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as they affect children living and learning in these locations. But it is equally important to think *beyond* educational matters. Teachers and teacher educators must always consider and acknowledge the effects on education practice of spatial marginality, and how this operates to intensify and exacerbate the effects of dominant sociological issues of race, class, gender and geography.

While a quest for social justice across all these areas is central to my argument, the fact that social positioning in relation to race, class and gender may be experienced very differently according to location warrants specific attention to *place*, and to *places* – and to the range of different ‘rural social spaces’ in which educational policy and practice are enacted. Education policy development in Australia is generally a centralised practice, predominantly produced in and for the dominant metropolitan population. The fact that its realisation in rural schools always occurs ‘somewhere else’ – away from the centre (Massey, 2005; Green & Letts, 2007) – means that we need the capacity to attend to the differences and diversity of the geographic, economic and social relationships that interact to produce some of the most marginalised manifestations of rural social space (Reid et al., 2010) as more ‘wickedly’ problematic for social and educational sustainability than others.

PERSISTENT COMMUNAL DISADVANTAGE IN AUSTRALIA AS A WICKED PROBLEM

As noted above, the issue for rural schooling is that it happens in places that have historically been overlooked or disregarded in efforts to provide clear educational policy direction for the state. Centralised policy and governance practices can become inadequate, inappropriate and impossible to implement effectively if the particularities of different places are not taken into account. The federal government has recognised this for some time now, and the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC, 2012) has found it helpful to explicitly frame this situation as a *wicked problem* in order to draw attention to its complexity. *Dropping off the Edge 2015* argues that wicked problems are not just *difficult* for governments, institutions and communities to solve – they are almost *insoluble* without a major, and disruptive, conceptual and pragmatic rethinking.

Wicked Problems

A ‘wicked problem’ is an issue highly resistant to resolution. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), who coined the term, some issues are intransigent, and in spite of the best of intentions, social planning and resourcing they appear insoluble. Rittel and Webber (1973) described ‘wicked’ problems as social planning problems that cannot be successfully treated with the traditional linear, analytical approaches commonly available to policy workers. For the Australian Public Service Commission (2012), some complex issues become wicked problems for government when evidence emerges that no solution has been found that ‘works’. *Dropping off the Edge 2015* provides this sort of evidence, and illustrates how a single problem may have many interdependencies, producing the added difficulty of articulating a clear definition of just what the problem is. Wicked problems are multi-causal, and attempts to address them often lead to unforeseen consequences. In noting that some wicked problems are characterised by chronic policy failure, the APSC points to the fact that wicked problems are never stable: they are socially complex, and they often have no clear solution because they cannot be seen, conveniently, as the responsibility of any one organisation or jurisdiction. Importantly, addressing wicked problems involves changing *human* and *systems* behaviour, and this suggests that efforts to overcome them cannot, and can never, be quick or easy, or bear fruit within the characteristically short-term government policy-cycle timeframe (APSC, 2012).

The problem with traditional approaches in these situations is that they do not account for the effects of the particular, situated, social and material practices that emerge even as a proposed solution is being put in place. Sproull and Kiesler (1991) provide a helpful way of thinking about this, when they describe the ‘first-level effects’ of technologies, policies and practices as those that highlight the efficiency or productivity gains that are aimed for. These often drive policy and innovation without consideration of other, ‘second level effects’ that arise, always *shaped by the social and policy environment* in which they occur (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991, p. 8). Second-level effects are difficult to predict, because they are located in social systems, and they emerge, unpredictably, over time, often creating more, or different problems. Like a crack that slowly appears in the dam wall, patching up the surface in one area almost always means that the crack moves, the earth crumbles, or the patchwork fails to seal. The underlying problem remains, but it changes, expands and intensifies in particular areas: it may even disappear from view for a short time. Its basic complexity is deceptive – it looks different from different points of view. But seemingly innocuous events (a rainstorm, a swimming party, a growing tree) can suddenly and unexpectedly mean that the problem resurfaces. While it may look slightly different, it is still imbued with all the dimensions of its history and intractability, reminding us of the unintended consequences that can result from interventions to address wicked problems. The APSC (2012) notes that:

Unintended consequences tend to occur even more frequently if the problem has been artificially tamed, that is, it has been too narrowly addressed and the multiple causes and interconnections not fully explored prior to measures being introduced.

‘Communal disadvantage’ has all the hallmarks of just such a complex, persistent problem. *Dropping off the Edge 2015* identifies, for example, that nine of the top twelve ‘most disadvantaged’ postcodes in New South Wales in 1999 retained this classification in 2015 (Vinson et al., 2015, p. 9). Educational solutions will always play a part in addressing this problem, but my aim here is to convince educators that teachers must be well- prepared, willing and professionally educated, to think beyond education if they are to have significant effect.

Living and learning on the edge

The research of Vinson and colleagues drew on data derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, NAPLAN, and the Australian Early Development Index, as well as from state and territory government human-service agencies. These agencies provided additional information about important aspects of social disadvantage like child maltreatment and psychiatric admissions (Vinson et al., 2015, p.6). Using 22 different indicators to study the geographic distribution of disadvantage around Australia, *Dropping off the Edge 2015* noted that the dominant factors associated with areas of extreme disadvantage include high rates of criminal convictions, unemployment, lack of internet access, domestic violence, lack of educational qualifications, and significant numbers of young adults who are neither in work nor study. The Report found that people living in the most disadvantaged postcodes were three times more likely to be long-term unemployed, more than twice as likely to need disability support and to have experienced domestic violence, and about twice as likely to have a criminal conviction. In every state there is a marked degree of *spatial* concentration of disadvantage, with the highest ranked postcodes for disadvantage on these indicators coming from a very small range of geographic locations. And across the nation, the most disadvantaged postcodes are those with significant Aboriginal populations.

Vinson starts to use the language of the wicked problem when he discusses this data and looks beyond it. For instance, he points to the *deterioration* (on his scale) of one community, Aurukun, in spite of it having already been chosen, quite separately, as one site for the Cape York Welfare Reform Trials (a multi-dimensional seven-year experimental policy reform in Queensland). The increased disadvantage that characterised the lives of people living in Aurukun was evident in changes across a range of indicators from 2007-2015, including: criminal convictions, increasing numbers of young adults not engaged in work or study, and ongoing unemployment. The Report notes: *One contributor to the changes in unemployment and long term unemployment may be the cessation of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)* (Vinson et al., 2015, p.80), and yet the redesign of this was actually one of the hallmarks of the *Cape York Welfare Reform*. Although raising queries about this particular conclusion, a 2013 evaluation of the Reform also highlights the characteristics of ‘wickedness’ outlined above:

There were both barriers and facilitating factors associated with the implementation. One of the common findings across the trial communities was that some of the initiatives of the trial did not interact well with other services. This was found to be because they were not set up to facilitate interactions, because of competition and tension between services, and because of different working perspectives... (Katz & Raven, 2013, p.20).

Even though Aurukun *did* experience a positive improvement in ‘school attendance’, there is continuing controversy over what policy change this should be attributed to, and about the general effectiveness of the Reform in the timeframe necessary to show ‘success’ for ongoing government support. One of the key goals of the federal government’s *Closing the Gap* policy, which commenced after the social justice report from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma in 2005, for instance, is a commitment to equality for Indigenous people in health and life expectancy within twenty-five years. In November 2008, COAG approved the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* which set out six *Closing the Gap* targets focussed on

life expectancy and mortality rates; access to early childhood education for Indigenous children; reading, writing and numeracy achievements; Year 12 attainment rates, and closer alignment of employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Prior to the Welfare Reform trial, there had also been an injection of a range of other policy initiatives introduced at Aurukun, including ‘quality teaching’, and the influence of the ‘Stronger Smarter’ school leadership program (Sarra, 2012), which had cut absenteeism rates by 94 per cent at another Queensland school, Cherbourg, in the 1990s. But these educational solutions have been insufficient on their own. Over a decade later, and in spite of the success of ‘Stronger Smarter’ in Cherbourg, it remains, like Aurukun, one of the most disadvantaged communities in Queensland.

Naming disadvantage

It is important in this context that Vinson et al. (2015) have named Aurukun and Cherbourg as problematic places for social inequality. Often, the anonymisation of place in academic research washes out the specificities of geography, environment, history and social relations that produce the particular *rural social space* that forms the actual object of inquiry (Nespor, 2000). In fact, the academic establishment often dismisses as poor scholarship, or ‘journalism’, writing that is unconstrained by the strong ethical imperatives within the university environment, and chooses to select and portray aspects of identifiable places. This is seen as sensationalism, and ‘reporting’ rather than ‘research’. At the same time, however, a proper ethical tact and concern about the potential to ‘do harm’ to individuals, and to communities of people, always places strong constraints and limitations on what can be said. This is problematic for advocacy research (Davidson, 1988) because it also limits the ultimate value of studies that generalise, talk ‘around’ or cover up the specificities of an object of inquiry. For adequate attention to be given to a problem identified through inquiry, it is inappropriate to erase from a serious research report the things that create what Thompson (2002) calls *thisness* in relation to place. As Vinson et al. (2015) highlight, these are directly associated with the problem that is to be addressed.

However I do not want to suggest that what is represented, either in *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, or in what follows here, is the ‘truth’ about the places that are identified, in any absolute or definitive sense. Bourdieu points to this as an issue for all sociology, reminding us that:

[R]eferring to a “problem suburb” or “ghetto” almost automatically brings to mind, not “realities” – largely unknown in any case to the people who rush to talk about them – but phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less controlled words and images, such as those conveyed in the tabloids and by political propaganda or rumour (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 123).

As well as pointing to the complexity of these situations, naming these two, well-known communities also indicates the way that particular, usually small and fairly isolated country towns like these come to stand in for and evoke all the history of deficiency associated with ‘the rural problem’ in education and can even add to the problem in an ongoing way (Reid et al., 2010). As Morgan (1991) argues, the merits of advocacy *can only be defended to the extent that advocacy researchers bring a measure of systematic doubt to bear on their work and seek a generalizability in the knowledge that they produce* (p.226). Green and Reid (2014) note that attention to real places in research is complex and difficult. It requires more rigorous member-checking and confirmation of researcher interpretation – not as fact, but as a legitimate interrogation of the often diverse and contradictory range of ‘data’ at hand, to confirm a sufficient level of generalizability within the site. This must be interrogated in terms of its selection and the interests it serves, and it certainly involves a deep and nuanced understanding of the ‘community’ in terms of (rural) social space.

For policy makers, educational leaders and teachers concerned with improving the chances of children living in the places named as sitting at the end of Vinson et al.’s (2015) hierarchy of

disadvantage, just the naming is often enough. Many of the names in *Dropping off the Edge 2015* are already marked and identified as places that have a 'disadvantaged community' above all else. This is itself a second-level effect that adds to and compounds the *degree* of wickedness of the problem to be addressed. But because the longitudinal evidence and argument advanced by Vinson (2007) and Vinson et al. (2015) in relation to these identified places cannot be ignored, I want to turn now to a more methodological, conceptual issue that arises with the idea of 'community' and 'communal' that is produced by its usage in the Report.

UNDERSTANDING 'COMMUNITY' AS (RURAL) SOCIAL SPACE

In 2014, Michael Corbett pointed to the deeply problematic nature of the idea of 'community' in the discourse of rural education, as well as in the social sciences more broadly. He made the argument that effective rural education policy needs to problematize the idea of 'community' and *develop it in ways that avoid playing into nostalgic and retrogressive notions of the rural* (Corbett, 2014, p.603). He cites Raymond Williams (1985) to argue that: *unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) [the term 'community'] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term* (p.76).

The implications of the idea of *persistent communal disadvantage in Australia* suggest that more work needs to be done to emphasise the inadequacy of 'community' as a signifier of the complexity of place. *Dropping off the Edge (2015)* uses the words 'community' or 'communal' 190 times in its 160 pages, yet it ultimately fails to articulate what it is clearly showing: that the idea of community functions in *exclusionary ways*, often remaining silent on exactly *who and what counts as community, a question that is often contested, sometimes violently* (Corbett, 2014, p. 604) within particular communities themselves. Importantly, the words 'Aboriginal' 'ATSI' or 'Indigenous' are used in total only 24 times across the whole document, even though two iterations explicitly clarify that:

every one of the postcodes listed as 'most disadvantaged' in New South Wales is home to a significant number of ATSI people, with percentages ranging from approximately double the ATSI share of the NSW population to more than 50% in several non-metropolitan areas. To be listed as 'most disadvantaged' reflects a top 5% ranking across at least ten of the indicators used – a substantial degree of cumulative disadvantage (Vinson et al., 2015, p. 53).

A rural community that comprises 50 per cent Aboriginal people almost by definition should not be thought of as singular. Instead, I suggest, it is more helpful for policy makers to think of 'community' in terms of the more complex idea of *rural social space*. According to Reid et al. (2010), this is the lived experience for inhabitants produced in that location as a result of the dynamic and historical interplay of its particular articulation of geography, economy and demography. There may well be no *singular* experience of community at all in many places, and much of what we take for granted as generalised and shared connections between members of a 'community' in a particular place might well be secondary to connections outside that place. Reid et al. (2010) highlight the itinerant nature of some members of these communities for instance, and the effect this has on 'communal' interactions and stability. Corbett cites Bowers (2008) and Nespor (2008) to show how, in a rapidly expanding technological universe, *places themselves are set within complex and inevitably oppressive articulations of global capitalism and local cultures* (Corbett, 2014, p. 605).

Such an understanding calls into question a unitary idea of 'place', and 'place-conscious education' (Green & Reid, 2015). As Massey (2005) notes:

Attempts to write about the uniqueness of place have sometimes been castigated for depoliticisation. Uniqueness meant that one could not reach for the eternal rules. But 'politics' in part precisely lies in not being able to reach for that kind of rule; a world that demands the ethics and the responsibility of facing up to the

event; where the situation is unprecedented and the future is open. Place is an event in that sense too (p. 141).

While there is rich possibility in theoretically informed and politically sensitive place-conscious work in rural education, and there is some indication that this is indeed happening in the field, more is needed to make place really matter as an organizing principle for social justice and environmental agency. As Corbett (2014) puts it, *[c]ommunity and its contemporary proxy, place, no longer serve as innocent, authentic, experiential locations for educational practice (p.605)*. It is not enough for educators to simply adjust their pedagogy and utilise the affordances of place with an assumption that:

[r]edemption ... can be found through emphasizing place, becoming more conscious of it, digging in, working and living on a more localized scale, and, in regards to schooling, grounding pedagogy and curriculum in the notion of place-as-community (Nespor, 2008, p. 490).

Rather, we need to attend to ‘rural social space as’ an idea that expands the dominant critical agenda of social justice. This means acknowledging that we always live in a more than social world: that we live in places that have geographies *and* histories, and these matter. It is important to note that ‘rural social space’ is used here it is not simply a descriptor to differentiate between city and country. Rather it references the particular model described by Reid and colleagues (2010), which signifies the ways in which each and every rural place is differently ‘practised’ into complete realisation through integration of its economy, geography and demography realised as effects of its history and the overlay of governance and policy. The term ‘rural social space’ functions as a kind of shorthand for this, here.

Soja (1989) reminds us that *we must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us (p.6)*, and of how *relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life*. This means that all *human geographies become filled with politics and ideology*. This is particularly the case in rural areas in relation to Indigenous people and their historical interrelationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, in a particular place. This history has been shaped by local and global industrial and economic structures, as well as by the particular affordances of the local environment. Traditional Indigenous cultures have a strong social, symbolic and spiritual relationship to land, which means that a (post)colonial history of settlement and industry has effected far more than symbolic violence to their culture and capital as original inhabitants of the country. For much of Australia’s history, this has been both unseen and ‘unsayable’ in discourses of colonial power, squatters’ rights, and Terra Nullius. Non-traditional Indigenous cultures are often the hybrid result of forced resettlement, and the overlay of European religions, cultures, farming, land and water management practices, education and government policy that make assumptions about what a particular ‘community’ is like, needs, or wants. It is both inappropriate and inadequate for education and schooling to deal with these issues superficially (Reid, 2017).

Understanding any community as ‘rural social space’ highlights the impossibility of paying attention to education (or health, or employment) as a single answer where there are wicked problems to contend with. Highlighting the importance of a focus on understanding rural social space in (teacher) education is helpful because it forces schools and teachers to attend to the complexity of every ‘community’, and foregrounds the need for connection and interconnection with history and policy – and the ongoing tensions and interrelationships among these. As *Dropping off the Edge 2015* shows, in the lived experience of those on the edge, equity is the prisoner of power, and this is as often determined by the *rural social space* constructed in particular places and times, as it is by the investments and interests of individuals, social institutions and agencies, and the oversighting governance of the state.

In the next section I name and discuss another place that is identified by Vinson et al. (2015) as constituting a wicked problem². This is an exemplary, well-known, and very public case that allows me to explore how its particular rural social space has become harder and harder to see functioning as a single and unified ‘community’ – and where the second-level effects of a singularly-focussed, educational solution, appear to have produced a set of even more problematic second-level effects (Sproull & Kiesler, 2001).

ATTENDING TO SECOND LEVEL EFFECTS

The Appendix to this paper provides access to a range of documentary evidence, all in the public domain, relating to the town of Walgett, NSW, 2832. As a case study, it is possible to gain understandings that may be relevant to all the ‘communities’ that Vinson and his colleagues see to be potentially, if not already, ‘dropping off the edge’. The depiction of the ‘Walgett’ presented through the public media and official government accounts in the Appendix is clearly incomplete, a ‘construction’, an imaginary – a Bourdieuan *phantasm*. What emerges from the range of points of view attributed to a range of members of this single ‘community’ is an account of a particular rural social space. This has emerged as an effect of its geographic, demographic and economic history, and of the policies that have overwritten them in an effort to govern and control the ‘edge’ of Australian civilisation.

The town of Walgett, which takes its name from an Aboriginal word meaning ‘the meeting place of two rivers’, is located in northern NSW near the junction of the Barwon and Namoi rivers. The biggest above-ground grain silos in the Southern Hemisphere are situated approximately 3kms out of Walgett, and with good rainfall, two decades ago these were handling nearly 200,000 tonnes of grain destined for national and international markets. The town operates as the governance centre of the Walgett Shire, and is served by railway lines as well as the Kamilaroi and Castlereagh highways linking it to larger centres in the north, east and south. In 2013, it had a population of about 2300, comprising approximately 1,000 Indigenous people, 1,000 non-Indigenous Australian-born people, and 300 people who were born overseas. Its history intersected with Australia’s own development as a nation, when it became a touchstone in the 1960s Freedom Rides, which highlighted to the world the chronic racial discrimination that had come to mark social relations in the town.

Framed within an analysis of rural social space, the detailed accounts of this history, and of the trajectory of more recent events provided in the Appendix, highlight how the events of the present connect to earlier eruptions of the crack in the wall of a singular ‘community’ in Walgett. For reasons of space I cannot elaborate these here, but I suggest that even just a cursory survey of the chronological list of titles of media reports about education in Walgett from 2012-2016 will amply demonstrate almost all the dimensions of ‘wickedness’ that Vinson et al. (2015) have effectively highlighted. Following through the media links, however, shows how the wicked problem that ‘Walgett’ has become, in a policy sense, was neither inevitable nor unpredictable in terms of the nature of this *rural social space*. These accounts tell the story of a very well intentioned (educational) policy solution. Its first-level effects can be said to be successful. But the material in the Appendix also shows how, because it could not simultaneously attend to the full range of effects of the complex history of social relations that have produced the rural social space of Walgett as so ‘wickedly problematic’, it seems to have unintentionally added to the social division and disruption of ‘community’ in this place.

² The identification of this particular location, like all the others named by Vinson et al. (2007, 2015) and the media as places facing ‘wicked’ problems highlights the irony of the term ‘wicked’ in the moral sense as well – and it is this that Bourdieu captures in his sense of the emotional to the *phantasy* of the ‘problem suburb’.

It is worth noting, too, that this particular representation of the story of school education in Walgett from 2012 to 2016 is set within the context flowing from *Closing the Gap* as outlined above. The Appendix link demonstrates that the original 2008 planning for the larger regional *Murdi Paaki* initiative did not include 'education' in this 'whole of government' approach. But it shows that state funding was directed to a number of initiatives simultaneously aimed at achieving the outcomes of *Closing the Gap*. And it also shows that considerable planning went in to the establishment, in 2012, of a broadly focused 'Connected Communities' program that included education, and Walgett schools. Well-funded and touted as a major change in consultative and inter-agency collaboration, it placed strong emphasis on the role and agency of the school principal in these communities, and was optimistically and supportively introduced. Yet this evidence suggests that its successes over this time frame have still been limited. The deep-seated cracks created in rural social spaces by the effects of social, economic and environmental histories and policies cannot be 'fixed' up in such a short term.

This approach to providing the 'evidence' for my argument here has highlighted the ethical tensions I have experienced in preparing this paper, and the presentations that have preceded it (Reid, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). My doubt about the benefits of naming and highlighting the specificity of Walgett as useful for allowing insight into the value of thinking with a model of rural social space, is accompanied by the possibility of producing other, unpredictable, second-level effects of naming this community in the journal of an educational community concerned with rural education. As Bourdieu (1999) noted, the *more or less controlled words and images, such as those conveyed in the tabloids and by political propaganda or rumour* (p.123) produce a representation of a 'community' that represent the lived realities of some participants in the rural social space I am evoking here. But even the cursory attention I have been able to give to this case of Walgett as 'rural social space' clearly indicates that there is more to this story, and more to Walgett. The model asks (teacher) educators to work with the understanding that such partial information should not be taken for granted as an adequate, useful or sufficient knowledge base for understanding it as a site for education policy and practice.

REFLECTION

My purpose here has not been to sensationalise or add to the symbolic violence enacted on the town and people of Walgett, but to challenge education (and teacher education) policy makers and professionals to consider how we might better assist in the resolution of the wicked problem of sustained social disadvantage. I have also tried to suggest that the now well- recognised and well-explicated pedagogies of place, and possibility (Comber, 2015), alongside which the idea of the study of rural social space in teacher education has developed, may best serve our needs at this point in time. Comber (2015) quotes Doreen Massey (2005) in this regard, to argue that places always challenge us, and require us to *confront the challenge of the negotiation of multiplicity* (p.149). Elsewhere, Massey speaks about

... the necessity of negotiating across and among difference the implacable social fact of shared turf. If places, (localities, regions, nations) are necessarily the location of the intersection of disparate trajectories, then they are necessarily places of 'negotiation' in the widest sense of that term. This is an important shift, which renders deeply problematical any easy summoning of 'community' either as pre-existing or as a simple aim (Amin, 2002, cited in Massey, 2004, p.6.).

Such thinking calls for a reform agenda that asks different sorts of questions. In preparing teachers, we can no longer think of any of the children to be taught in any location as already known (Reid, 2017), or identify them as members of singular, coherent 'communities'. Teachers and teaching that ignores the history and trajectories of power that have produced the immediate rural social space experienced in any 'community' can never be fully effective. Rather than seeing places as *settled, and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by 'external'*

forces, Massey argues that places necessitate invention because they ask us to confront the challenge of the negotiation of multiplicity and acknowledge the sheer fact of having to get on together; the fact that you cannot 'purify' spaces/ places (Massey, 2005, p. 141).

As the Australian Public Service Commission (2012) notes:

Tackling wicked problems is an evolving art. They require thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the interrelationships among the full range of causal factors underlying them. They often require broader, more collaborative and innovative approaches. This may result in the occasional failure or need for policy change or adjustment.

Such an approach gives hope for the sustainability of rural communities. It counters more drastic suggestions that question the usefulness of continuing to try to 'fix' such enormously wicked problems. Pointing to the amount of duplication and waste associated with uncoordinated and bureaucratised government and NGO programs designed to solve the wicked problems of towns like Walgett, the question has been asked that *[i]f a welfare economy is the only thing propping up a place, what future does it have?* (Fitzpatrick, 2016, p. 17). Indigenous academic Marcia Langton is quoted as suggesting that:

Policy has to be about investing in growth and disinvesting in dying towns [...]. This is not racism, it's about how people get equitable access to resources. If they're going to stay, then you need to have a mobile workforce – but idiot racism gets in the way [of decision making] (Fitzpatrick, 2016, p. 17).

In such a scenario: *By far the most important issue is getting the kids properly educated and into further training* (Fitzpatrick, 2016, p. 17). It can be argued that almost every one of the well-intentioned interventionary moves documented in the Appendix aimed to 'solve' the problem of sustainable and effective schooling for the children of Walgett. Yet at the end of 2016, the Appendix 'case' shows that a \$9 million dollar new school has been built for a community that includes some sections who are supported to send their children elsewhere for education. As they are reviewed together, however, every solution seems to have emerged as a reactionary, linear, short-term response to the range of second-level effects of the larger policy programs. The individual solutions seem to have ignored the complexity of the rural social space that characterises this 'community', and produced a set of more and more desperate moves aimed at first-level policy success. The poverty of the idea of 'community' considered without attention to rural social space seems clear.

CONCLUSION

As a researcher advocating for forms of (teacher) education that can help address the wicked problems of sustained social disadvantage, I have used the case of one community in danger of 'dropping off the edge' to argue that educational solutions on their own are insufficient when such disadvantage has been socially and historically constructed over time. Yet teacher education does have the important responsibility of preparing teachers to work as effectively as possible in the schools serving such communities.

Garth Boomer's (1993) assertion that the worst thing for schooling to offer students who lack the symbolic capital of social 'advantage' is a curriculum of 'thin gruel' is central to this project. If children in disadvantaged communities are to be taught in ways that move beyond an 'educational diet' of basic skills or the low expectations evident in entertaining but unchallenging activities, teacher education needs to attend to education in rural social space. Teachers must be prepared in ways that help them enable students in disadvantaged communities to develop critical, action-oriented, social justice perspectives on the world (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Following Barbara Comber's (2015) argument, teachers must attend carefully and critically to the affordances of place

so that they can imagine possibilities for working in and with the dynamics of place – acknowledging the history, geography, economics and cultures that have produced the rural social spaces they inhabit with their students, and that continue to constrain or enable their success.

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Appendix: Digital Sources for Case Study

Digital media references providing contextual information about Walgett*

- Our Town: Walgett/ Lightning Ridge <http://walgett.localinfo.org.au/ourtown.htm>
- Walgett Shire Council website <http://www.walgett.nsw.gov.au/>

Select timeline of digital media references to community and education in Walgett*

2008

1. Planning letter from Murdi Paaki Partnership Project Community Facilitator Walgett/Collarenebri, www.walgettams.com.au/_literature_124672/Murdi_Paaki_Partnership_Project

2012

2. A grand vision out of reach, Natasha Robinson, *The Australian*, July 14 2-12, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/a-grand-vision-out-of-reach/news-story/57b29d7312bfc28134e16f1df52c9388>
3. Fact Sheet Connected Communities, NSW DET, <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/yr2012/connected-communities.pdf>

2013

4. Disgust at NSW indigenous schools system, Justine Ferrari, *The Australian*, 26 September 2013 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/disgust-at-nsw-indigenous-schools-system/story-fn9hm1pm-1226727265463>

2014

5. NSW's Connected Communities program is helping remote school performance Justine Ferrari, *The Australian*, 28 October 2014 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/education/nsws-connected-communities-program-is-helping-remote-school-performance/news-story/9b4758fc68b4acdc0901f80058f61560>

2015

6. The Walgett College Story <http://www.badapplebullies.com/thewalgettcollegestory.htm>
7. Walgett school crisis: Adrian Piccoli agrees to urgent meeting with teachers, Julie Power, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April 2015 <http://www.smh.com.au/national/secondary-education/walgett-school-crisis-adrian-piccoli-agrees-to-urgent-meeting-with-teachers-20150424-1ms9ep.html>
8. Connected Communities: Education Minister Adrian Piccoli promised 'bold actions' to support Aboriginal students in NSW, Philippa McDonald and Tahmina Ansari, *ABC News*, May 20, 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-20/connected-communities-promised-help-for-aboriginal-students/6483958>
9. Walgett's battle with school violence takes heavy toll on NSW town, Philippa McDonald and Tahmina Ansari, *ABC News*, May 21 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-20/walgett's-battle-with-school-violence-takes-heavy-toll-on-town/6484436>

10. Walgett school crisis: parents get money to send kids to better schools under Isolated Children's Scheme, Julie Power. *Canberra Times*, May 29 2015, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/nsw/walgett-school-crisis-parents-get-money-to-send-kids-to-better-schools-under-isolated-childrens-scheme-20150529-ghc8vo.html>
11. Walgett, the NSW town losing its Aboriginal youth, Julie Power, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 30 2015 <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/walgett-the-nsw-town-losing-its-aboriginal-youth-20150527-ghb8pa.html>
12. Police stationed inside troubled Walgett school Philippa McDonald, *ABC News*, 6 July 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-05/police-stationed-inside-troubled-walgett-school/6590964>
13. After decades of trouble, push to empower puts twinkle in their eyes, Rick Morton, Jessica Rapana, P.1, *The Australian*, 22-23 August 2015 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/empowered-communities-indigenous-kids-with-a-twinkle-in-their-eyes/news-story/0a43deac58295670604c812641542637>
14. Fields of dreams in a broken town, Rick Morton, *The Australian*, 22-23 August 2015, p. 19 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/disadvantaged-walgett-sees-lights-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel/news-story/9ead84b3af673806fc41621a66124d6a>
15. *Town, Interrupted: How a Viral video changed Walgett*, Debra Jopson (Images N. McLaughlin) *SBS News*, 2 December 2015. <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/feature/town-interrupted-how-viral-video-changed-walgett>

2016

16. CONNECTED COMMUNITIES STRATEGY - INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT (2015), Andrew Goodall, Sydney: Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/connected-communities-strategy-interim-evaluation-report>
17. Connected Communities program failing to improve academic outcomes for Aboriginal students in NSW, report finds. Joanna Woodburn and Brigid Glanville, 10 February 2016, *ABC News*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-09/connected-communities-not-helping-academic-outcomes-report-finds/7152878>
18. Walgett Community College, the 'worst school in the state' gets a fresh start. Kelsey Munro, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *Maitland Mercury*, 29 October 29 2016. <http://www.maitlandmercury.com.au/story/4259212/walgett-community-college-the-worst-school-in-the-state-gets-a-fresh-start/?cs=25>
19. 'You can actually call this a school now': Makeover for Walgett's troubled high. Many Tsigias, *SBS news*, 12 December 2016 <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/12/09/you-can-actually-call-school-now-makeover-walgetts-troubled-high>

* All links retrieved 18 January 2017